

Delta State University

William N. LaForge, President

ON THE PATH TO EXCELLENCE

State of the University Address
Opening Convocation: Academic Year 2015-16

August 14, 2015

On The Path To Excellence

Welcome to each of you as we commence the new academic year and the 91st year of Delta State's storied history. I am pleased to announce that we will celebrate Delta State's 90th birthday on September 15th with a spectacular program being organized by Dr. James Robinson and members of the Dedicated Statesmen Association, and I encourage you to come out for that event.

As I begin my third cycle at the helm, I am pleased to report that the state of the university is solid and progressing quite well. We are successfully tackling major budget and enrollment challenges, building on our strong programmatic foundations, and realizing growth in some key areas. I am bullish on Delta State and our future, and I am confident that we are on a path to excellence. It continues to be my distinct honor to serve you, our students and alumni, and our community.

Today, I will focus on six themes: 1) academics; 2) student recruitment and student success; 3) business and finance; 4) campus facilities and grounds; 5) the Delta State family; and, 6) visioning — the next steps on the path to excellence.

I. Academics

I am pleased to report outstanding news regarding our academic standing and accreditation. This past year, we successfully completed institutional reaccreditation by SACS, our national credentialing agency — a result that is critical to our very existence. Thanks again to our SACS Chair, Dr. Beverly Moon, and her team for leading us in this vital effort. Our College of Education's teacher preparation program was reaccredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation with the highest mark possible and, quite remarkably, with no recommendations for improvement. Congratulations to Dean Leslie Griffin and her colleagues for this stellar outcome. Other accreditation successes include: for nursing, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing; for aviation, initial accreditation from the Aviation Accreditation Board International; and, for our music program, the National Association of Schools of Music.

It was my pleasure recently to notify nine members of the academy of their promotions in rank or the attainment of tenure. Our outstanding faculty members are demonstrating classroom excellence in guiding our students to success. Many are also engaged in creative and constructive professional activities such as travel abroad, student mentoring and advising, publishing, independent research, conference presentations, association leadership, community outreach, project and artistic showcasing, and consulting. I encourage and support these enterprising pursuits, and I aspire for the university to be more financially supportive of these activities.

The highly successful International Business Symposium, sponsored by alumnus and UPS CEO David Abney, continues to be a star attraction in our College of Business. The inaugural International Delta Blues Conference was a smashing success, and, along with our new interdisciplinary minor in blues studies this semester, it sets the stage for Delta State's rightful claim as the academic center of the blues. Our second annual Race Relations Conference, *Winning the Race*, perhaps exceeded last year's award-winning program, and affords us the opportunity to be a leader in a dialogue that is critical to the Delta and to the state.

Across the academy, we are seeing growth — in Nursing programs, Social Work, DMI Entertainment Industry Studies, Geospatial Information Technology, and pre-professional health-related programs in the sciences; in masters programs in Teaching, Counseling, and Health, Physical Education, and Recreation; and, in Health Care Administration, Commercial Aviation, and Computer Information Systems — all programs that continue to distinguish the university and attract more students.

II. Student Recruitment and Student Success

Student recruitment remains a challenge, and it will take all of us pulling together to succeed. The marketplace for new students is very competitive, especially in light of the shrinking pool of Mississippi prospects, the success of certain Division I football teams last fall, and the attractiveness of community colleges because of their low tuition. Recruitment continues to be a major priority for us because it is our lifeblood and it drives our revenue — tuition dollars plus credit hour production that factor into our state funding formula.

We are working hard to attract new students from high schools and community colleges, and I ask once again for your assistance in identifying and recruiting new students for the university. It may not be your — or my — job, but it is at least partially our responsibility and obligation. I have recruited in more than 70 high schools and community colleges around the state, and I plan to continue recruiting visits this coming year.

We are providing more scholarships than ever to community college transfers who are Phi Theta Kappa honorary society members. Those scholarships boost both our enrollment numbers and the academic quality of our student body with the addition of more than 100 students who sport GPAs of 3.5 to 4.0. Our recruiting emphasis is on the general student population, but we are also turning special attention to our graduate programs that have seen a downturn in the last year, and we likewise need to bolster our summer school enrollment which has fallen off the last two years. Continuing emphasis on international student recruitment should help enrollment numbers as well, and I am pleased to report that our international student/faculty exchange program went well in its first year, with major exchanges between Delta State and Perm State University in Russia. If you haven't read or heard the stories of our students and faculty who traveled to Russia this past spring, I encourage you to do so. What an experience they had! In early October, we will host the first faculty-student delegation from John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin in Poland. These types of exchanges and relationships are important aspects of students' learning experiences.

A special "heads-up" regarding this fall's enrollment numbers: Because the date for class cancellation and the so-called "purge process" is now earlier than in the past, we will, for the first time, report reconciled enrollment numbers to IHL, meaning our published enrollment numbers will likely show a reduction in enrollment compared to last year. Despite the fact that we are predicting an actual slight net increase in enrollment, I want to brace you for reports that will likely show that we are down in our numbers.

In the area of student success and retention, we have enjoyed a banner year of initiatives, and I think our investment in retention strategies will yield great dividends in the years ahead. Under the direction of Christy Riddle, our Student Success Center continues to contribute to our students' academic achievements. The Academic Support

Lab had approximately 7,500 visits during 2014-15. A new headliner program, Okra Scholars, was rolled out this spring to provide special assistance to students who are first generation, Delta-based, Pell Grant-eligible, or in the ACT test score range of 17-21. This program is made possible by a First in the World grant from the U.S. Department of Education, one of only 24 given nationwide and the only one in Mississippi. We are turning up the heat on helping these students gain academic traction and find their path to success.

Other aspects of our revamped student retention program, under the leadership of Provost Charles McAdams, include our “early alert program” to identify academic problems at an early stage, and a totally revised first year seminar program, under the superb direction of Professor Ethan Schmidt. The new approach includes a writing component, stepped up advising of all students, and retention scholarships to help students meet financial difficulties that often lead to dropping out. These efforts are paying off. Between first and second semesters, we realized a 7% increase in retention among members of our freshmen class who participated in the first year seminar. We are also taking seriously the financial plight that many students face in trying to finish their degrees. This year, we increased the availability of external dollars for student tuition support by directing \$178,000 from the Workforce Investment Act program to students completing their final three semesters. Dr. McAdams, thank you and your team for your leadership with these important initiatives.

With successful recruitment efforts and new retention strategies, we can win the enrollment management battle and increase our numbers. Academics and students are why we are here. Classroom instruction and helping our students succeed on the path to graduation are our drivers. First and foremost, we are all here to support those missions. I thank each of you, no matter what your role, for all you do every day to help us achieve those goals. It doesn't take a village. It takes a Delta State family — each of us.

III. Business and Finance

While academics and students are our priorities, the business and financial side of the house is important because it is the framework upon which the academy depends. I am very grateful to our administrative staff colleagues for the terrific support you provide. I

am equally grateful to all of you — faculty and staff — for engaging in the ownership of this university as we face down our budget challenges by making smart decisions and treating institutional dollars as if they are our own — by turning off lights at the end of class or the day, carefully watching expenses, handling funds smartly, and making prudent purchasing choices.

Since I arrived on campus in April 2013, we have engaged in two budget-cutting exercises, both conducted in a thorough, consultative, and transparent manner. The first was a belt-tightening effort to reduce expenses during the 2013-14 academic year. It was successful, but not enough. So this past year, we dug deeper to meet the budgeting expectations of our governing board and accrediting agency, and, just as importantly, to put our financial house in order so we can ensure a future of fiscal integrity that supports our academic mission. That effort led to permanent budget cuts and program eliminations that will produce a million dollars in savings over the next year.

One year ago, I told you that ‘nothing fuels my sense of urgency about stabilizing our budget and enrollment more than the need to give pay raises.’ And, I promised you that we would give pay raises if we did two things: 1) cut expenses, and 2) receive either an increased appropriation from the state or an equivalent tuition increase. We made good on that promise. This past year’s budget reductions, along with increased legislative funding, set the stage for well-deserved and overdue pay raises that became effective July 1. While the salary increases were a step in the right direction, I wanted the percentages to be higher, and we will continue to press the legislature for additional funding next year. Our intention is for this year’s raises to be the first installment. Our plan is to implement another round of raises next summer *if* we can continue to maintain spending within our budget and realize another increase in state funding.

An increase in tuition is another important factor that will contribute to our improving financial situation. Tuition represents about half of our revenue in addition to what the state provides us. We have held tuition steady at \$6,012 annually for the last three years, and we are holding fast to that number this academic year to ensure college affordability for as many students as possible. That attractive tuition figure helps bring us students. Delta State is an incredible educational value at that price — a fact recently

recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* ranking us the best out-of-state tuition value in the country. However, the time is right to implement a tuition increase for the 2016-17 academic year. That additional revenue will help support another round of pay raises, faculty professional development, and other needs.

Our total current year budget is \$46 million, representing a repeat of last year's level for general expenses, plus an amount to cover the pay raises everyone received. Going forward, we need to continue exercising care in spending, but I am pleased to report that we anticipate *no further budget cuts under the current circumstances*. We are dutifully managing scarce resources, and I appreciate your support and assistance in that endeavor. I hope it is clear that diligent budget management and prudent spending *do* pay dividends. And, let me take this opportunity to thank Vice President for Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer Steve McClellan, and his staff, for all their hard work to improve our budget situation. As a reminder, the new university budget will be available online for your review early next month.

On the topic of outside funding, we are concentrating considerable effort on raising private dollars from alumni and friends of the university, corporations, and foundations, as well as targeted funding from government. The Delta State Foundation enjoyed its most successful fundraising year on record. We are raising money! The foundation set new records for both annual fund giving — \$500,000+ against a \$425,000 goal — and total gifts/pledges — more than \$4.3 million for the second consecutive year. These new private dollars go a long way in supplementing our institutional funding in the areas of scholarships, faculty travel, office staffing, campus events, and numerous programs — including elements of the vision spelled out in my remarks today. A tip of the hat to Executive Director of Alumni and Foundation Keith Fulcher and his staff for their hard work in this record-setting year. Within the next year or so, the Foundation plans to announce a major new fundraising campaign.

Major grants we received this past year include a \$1.6 million First in the World Grant from the U.S. Department of Education that supports our Okra Scholars program and a \$1 million grant from the Hearin Foundation to support a new program that will provide internships, graduate studies, and graduate assistantships for Teach For America alumni to

encourage them to remain in the Delta after their two year teaching stints. We had another successful TFA summer institute on campus, and we hope to continue our relationship with TFA, which provides a good revenue source for the university through a service contract and credit hours produced. To support our DMI international exchange program with Perm State in Russia, Delta State received a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of State. Provost McAdams and Nursing School Dean Libby Carlson have raised nearly a half million dollars from hospitals in the area to support new faculty positions in the nursing school. Just recently, the Gertrude Ford Foundation made a \$50,000 gift to the foundation with the note that they think the university is doing a good job managing scarce resources. So, much-needed external funds to supplement state dollars and tuition are increasing steadily, and we will continue our aggressive approach with private foundations and government sources.

IV. Campus Facilities and Grounds

Turning to campus facilities and grounds, take a look around, and you will see that the complexion of the campus is beginning to change. As the saying goes, please pardon our dust as exciting improvements are in the works. There will be inconveniences for a while as we tear up the streets and lay down new ones. The big flying saucer we call the dining hall is about to undergo a multi-million dollar facelift beginning next year. This summer, we refurbished the bathrooms in Lawler-Harkins women's residence hall, and put down new flooring in Wyatt Gym hallways. Fire suppression technology has been added to several residence halls. Caylor/White-Walters will finally be completed during this academic year. Planning is underway for renovation of Zeigel Hall and the Coliseum over the next few years. All these projects are supported by funds that are specifically designated for renovation, repair, and construction.

The new baseball stadium will be dedicated in October, and is being financed with private dollars headlined by a half-million dollar lead gift from Delta State alumnus and Foundation President Tim Harvey and his wife, Nancy (whose father, Dr. Bill Cash, was long-time chair of the history department). The construction of Statesman Boulevard should be underway within the year to connect Highway 8 to our athletic complex. In November, the GRAMMY Museum Mississippi will open on our campus, and what an event

it will be! We will soon communicate more information about the plans for the opening and Delta State's preparation for it. We have also entered into a formal educational partnership with the museum, and look forward to many outstanding programs in the years ahead.

Finally, I offer a special shout-out and sincere thanks to our facility management colleagues for maintaining our buildings so well and for keeping our campus grounds looking beautiful. Delta State shines because of you.

V. Delta State Family

As I turn to matters involving the Delta State family, I first note the loss of some very special people this past year: Billie Breland, Joe Garrison, Henry Outlaw, Stan Sandroni, Dorothy Shawhan, and Hugh Ellis Walker — all of whom were key members of our university family. Let us remember them in a moment of silence.

Among Delta State's retirees this year is Dr. Wayne Blansett, who enjoyed a 40-year career in Student Affairs. As a fitting tribute to him, our New Men's residence hall will be renamed Blansett Hall. Wayne and Diane, two all-star members of the Delta State family, please stand and receive our sincerest thanks for all you have done for Delta State.

Standing in for Wayne, as the search process for his successor continues, is our own Dr. E.E. "Butch" Caston, formerly Dean of the College of Education and Interim Provost. Dr. Caston is well-known within the Delta State family, and I am pleased he agreed to come out of retirement — one more time — to serve the university he loves. He will serve as Interim Vice President for Student Affairs until a successor takes office. Thank you, Butch!

Another member of my Cabinet, Dr. Myrtis Tabb, Associate Vice President for Finance and Administration, has announced her retirement this fall, and we will certainly miss her and her many contributions to campus life. Thank you, Myrtis!

A special note on campus governance and leadership: I am fortunate to be surrounded by some outstanding people who serve in leadership positions. They are thoughtful and visionary in what they do. And their work ethic is unparalleled. In addition to Provost McAdams, CFO McClellan, and Interim Student Affairs Vice President Caston, whom I have already mentioned, my executive committee team also includes Vice

President for University Relations, Dr. Michelle Roberts. A CEO could not ask for a better and more talented group of advisors. This past year, I also named Dr. Roberts my Chief of Staff, and I am very grateful to her for reorganizing the Office of the President and making sure the trains run on time. Other members of my Cabinet provide great leadership and representation for all campus interests: Keith Fulcher and Myrtis Tabb, whom I have already mentioned; Dean of Enrollment Services Debbie Heslep; Athletic Director Ronnie Mayers; Faculty Senate President Leslie Fadiga-Stewart; Academic Council Representative and Nursing School Dean Libby Carlson; Administrative Staff Council Chair Marilyn Read; and, Student Government President Mikel Sykes.

This past year, we established the Legends of Delta State, the university's highest and most prestigious lifetime order of achievement, reserved for individuals who made an extraordinary and lasting positive mark on Delta State. Of the five inaugural inductees selected, the first four include: 1) women's basketball coach and the namesake of collegiate basketball's Wade trophy, Coach Margaret Wade, whose statue now graces the courtyard in front of the Coliseum; 2) long-time director of student activities H.L. Nowell, for whom the Union is named; 3) President Emeritus Kent Wyatt who served as Delta State's leader for 24 years, and for whom the university administration building is named; and, 4) women's basketball coach, Lloyd Clark, who, like Coach Wade, led the Lady Statesmen to three national championships, and for whom the basketball court in the Coliseum is named.

Today I have the privilege of announcing the fifth Legend of Delta State whose induction will be October 3rd in conjunction with the dedication of the new baseball stadium and of a statue in his honor. It should come as no surprise that the man who built the Delta State baseball program and has served Delta State so well for so long will be honored as a Legend of Delta State — our own Coach Dave “Boo” Ferriss. Please help me salute our newest legend!

Integral to the university family are our athletic programs. In just a couple of weeks, we begin another exciting season of Statesmen football, a program that boasts more than half of its players with a 3.0 GPA or better, and eight with a 4.0. Delta State basketball standout LaQuavius Cotton won the national collegiate slam dunk contest. Early this summer, the Gulf South Conference honored two of our outstanding student-athletes —

softball standout Taylor Holland and Statesmen quarterback Tyler Sullivan — as members of the conference’s elite Top 10. And 13 of our swimmers and divers were named Academic All-American. *We are* a university of champions in the classroom and on the field.

The concept of the Delta State family connotes our mutual respect, collaboration, and support for one another. It represents those special qualities that set us apart from other institutions. It means we are a welcoming, helpful, inclusive campus. It is the personal touch our students have come to expect and that our alumni fondly remember. It especially means we provide excellent customer service to our students everywhere on campus at all times.

VI. Visioning – What’s Next on the Path to Excellence?

What will it take to elevate this university and our programs to the next level of success? What should we be doing to move the needle toward higher achievement?

At the recent President’s Cabinet advance, we began a discussion of “big-think” issues that will lay the foundation for our collective vision and the next steps on the path of excellence for Delta State. We focused on increasing academic distinction by ratcheting up support for student achievement and faculty professional development. We envisioned myriad future projects and programs — too many to mention here — that will help determine what Delta State looks like in 2025, our centennial year.

To continue those discussions, beginning this fall, I am asking the Vice Presidents and those Cabinet members who report directly to me to consult with their respective departments, and help us determine how we move to the next level of success for all programs across campus. The idea is for us all to think big and to identify the path to excellence. Said another way, what should your department look like five and ten years from now? I ask you to engage in this process and give us your best ideas. The outcomes will help us design a road map to our future.

As examples, I see us implementing strategies that will help us provide meaningful upgrades for our academic programming — goals such as adequate funding for the faculty professional development programs I mentioned earlier; possibly a senior thesis or

capstone-type project for every graduating senior; the growth of our honors program; enhancement of our student success and retention efforts; and, new private dollars to support academics across the board.

For starters, I am announcing three academic support initiatives. First, I have asked Alumni-Foundation Executive Director Keith Fulcher to commence a new Centennial fundraising program to raise annual fund dollars for each of our three colleges and the school of nursing, so our deans and chairs have additional resources at their disposal. These will be new, privately-raised dollars to complement the institutional funding that supports our core academic programs. It is high time that we restore travel, conference, and other professional development funding support for the benefit of the academy. This can be done with additional funds that empower and enable our deans, chairs, and program managers to direct targeted resources where they are most needed to support our academic mission. Second, I have approved the hiring of a designated academic fundraiser, with reporting responsibilities to the Provost and generously funded by our Foundation, to support annual and targeted project fundraising for our academic programs. And, third, to kick off the new funding effort for academics, we are immediately adding \$5,000 to each of the designated foundation funds for the three colleges and the school of nursing.

Other examples of vision-driven strategies for academics include an array of “next steps” for our student success and retention efforts. One step is implementing innovative ways to provide our undecided students with a guided pathway to success through “meta-majors” that will get them started on a stronger footing. Another approach is focusing on gateway courses, the ones that often tend to result in student drop-out. Still another idea is providing supplemental instructors to complement course work. And we want to shift the path-to-graduation culture toward the notion of a student’s full-time status being defined as 15 hours instead of 12 hours. I believe these measures will help bolster student academic performance and improve the climate for all students to feel they belong in college and can succeed. Provost McAdams will roll out specifics about these programs in the weeks ahead.

I envision more opportunities for our students and faculty in on-campus and off-campus academic pursuits. I have asked Provost McAdams to establish an Academic

Excellence and Recognition Task Force that will identify strategies to target and prepare our best students, not just for graduate and professional school programs and jobs, but also for Truman, Marshall, Mitchell, Goldwater, Wilson, Fulbright, and other similar fellowships...and someday maybe even a Rhodes scholarship. We, as thinkers, should certainly be teaching our students *how* to think. But, somewhat differently, we should also be showing them *how* to be creative and innovative, and *how* to adapt to the world around them. Time is of the essence. We have these students under our tutelage and care for only four or fewer years, and what they learn here should be for life. Likewise, I want to make available to our faculty an array of specialized post-graduate professional development opportunities in their fields, including participation in government programs through the National Endowment for the Humanities, NASA, the National Science Foundation, and other federal agencies, and through international programs such as Fulbright fellowships and other teaching and research ventures available overseas.

A vision for the future that is coming into focus is our standing as a musical and cultural mecca. The synergies are clear. With the strength, activities, and potential of the combination of our music and art departments, the Delta Music Institute, the Delta Center for Culture and Learning, the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, the International Delta Blues project, Bologna Performing Arts center programs, and our new partner, the GRAMMY Museum Mississippi, Delta State is establishing itself as a collective center of excellence for music and culture. Add to that potent mix Delta State's new low-power FM campus radio station, WDSW 88.1, which will be rolled out officially in the next few weeks. Increasingly, these musical and cultural areas will help define our future, and the programmatic review process this fall will allow us to pinpoint other key areas that should rightfully be a part of our vision for that future.

As examples of our increasing music-centric focus, the opening of the GRAMMY Museum Mississippi in November will afford the university many showcasing opportunities. The second annual International Delta Blues Conference is slated for October 5 and 6. On the cultural front, we have begun plans for next spring's Race Relations Conference. Taken together, those two conferences have become bookend, signature programs for the university.

Colleagues, it is time for us to take the next step toward excellence — to think big and grab the next rung on the ladder of success and achievement as we strive to make Delta State the best possible place to learn, teach, and work. I ask each of you to put the stamp of excellence on everything you do. I challenge you to do everything possible to educate students who, along with their parents and this state, are depending on us for guidance toward careers and opportunities that will bring meaning and value to their lives and to our communities.

Pause for a moment, and go into the proverbial stands to look down at what we are doing on the playing field of university teaching. Every day, you are affecting the lives of hundreds, even thousands, of individuals through the education our students are receiving and the spinoff benefits to families and communities. You are making a difference! When we graduate that first generation student, we are lifting up an entire family and community. When we connect with an incoming freshman and help her find the path to academic success, or turn a transfer student on to a subject matter he never dreamed would capture his imagination, we are giving a long-term gift and making a terrific down payment. When we demonstrate superb customer service by treating our students and each other as we would welcome a guest into our homes — with friendliness, helpfulness, and good cheer — we are building and shoring up our foundation, and preserving our legacy as a special and hospitable institution. But in all these endeavors, we are also receiving a benefit in the form of a professional gratification dividend that is better than a paycheck.

I ask you to grasp and follow a vision for what you do, to make a commitment to that vision, to see purpose in what you do each day, and to have passion in the way you do it. Help lay the solid foundation that will be so important in the next decade as we approach our centennial year as a university. Go boldly into this new academic year to prepare the next generation for the realities of the world and what we all hope will be a bright future. In your thoughts about advancing Delta State, think bigger and smarter. In the work you do, make your quest for excellence a source of pride for all of us in the Delta State family.

Here's to a successful academic year together as we continue to bring national distinction to this great regional university! I'm all in, and I hope you are too. Let's go make a difference!